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# The *Tao Te Ching* and its Relation to Deep Ecology

VANESSA PHILLIPS

## Setting the Stage for Ecology

The ancient Chinese text known as the *Tao Te Ching* can be used as a guide for bettering the self and as a way to practice effective governance of a country. Taken together, these ideals constitute a moral and philosophical way of life which stresses humility, weakness, and yielding to the *tao*. *Tao* is the way the universe works (Welch, 25). The *Tao Te Ching* describes the functioning of the universe, and how one can live in accord with the *tao*. Furthermore, *tao* is associated with the creation of the universe (Ch. 1, 25, 52) and continues to nurture all creation like a mother (Chan, 92). Though not a god or goddess, it is suggested that the *tao* acts like a mother to all things. Since everything comes from the nameless *tao*, “the origin of heaven and earth ... the mother of ten thousand things (Ch. 1),” this includes the earth we live on. Hence, the *Tao Te Ching* is also a manual teaching one to be in harmony with the *tao* of the earth. The earth is a highly complex and unique organism, the only planet in our solar system to support life.

The diversity of life on earth depends on the presence of water. Our planet is the right temperature for liquid water to exist and life on earth sprang from water. This is interesting because of the *Tao Te Ching*'s emphasis on the positive qualities of water (Chaps. 8, 15, 21, 34, 61, 66): “Great Tao overflows/To the left To the right./All beings owe their life to it” (Ch. 34). *Tao* pervades all aspects of life on earth. The earth tries to maintain a balance of energies and processes through cycles of generation and regeneration in order to support life. *Tao* is also about balance and cyclical processes. *Tao* is inextricably connected to this planet. Since the *Tao Te Ching* advises us to cultivate and nourish *tao*, I would argue that this includes the earth. I believe, therefore, that ecological thought and the *Tao Te Ching* are inherently related.

## The Meaning of Ecology

Before addressing the similarities between the *Tao Te Ching* and ecology, I must first examine ecology and the different modes of ecological thought. Ecology is “the science of the economy of animals and plants; that branch of biology which deals

with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life, etc" (*OED*, 58). Hence, ecology is basically about the relationships between animals and plants and their environment (Owens, 1-2):

The concept of the environment covers just about everything associated with organisms, And includes other organisms and the non-living part of the world in which life occurs. The weather, the physical and chemical composition of the soil, and seasonal changes in The length of daylight, are all part of an organism's environment ... No organism exists without an environment; organisms and the environments in which they live constitute an extremely thin layer on the surface of the earth, often called the biosphere....

Though we often think of ecology as only concerned with plants and animals, the category of "animals" includes humans. Our activities are not unconnected to the natural world; we are part of it as are all our creations (Owens, 23):

Man's activities from building and operating nuclear power stations to factory farming should be considered as an integral part of the complexity of the living world and are just as 'ecological' as a fen or a forest.

We should avoid the artificial dichotomy between "natural" and "manmade." For everything is part of the "natural" world and not primarily about humans. A city is just as much a part of the natural world as is a national forest. The interplay of ecological relationships is highly complex and extremely sensitive to any change in the system. As humans, we are a part of the biosphere and we continue to affect all other parts of the earth on a global scale.

### **Shallow vs. Deep Ecology**

Over the past twenty to thirty years, as we are becoming increasingly aware of the deteriorating state of the earth, there has been much debate regarding ecology and various ecological movements. Several of these movements are very philosophical in nature and contend that our environmental problems must be looked at holistically, not simply as isolated cases or events. Deep ecology is one of these holistic, philosophical movements and was developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972 (Dobson, 242). Deep ecology is distinguished from what Naess calls "shallow ecology." Shallow ecology, according to Naess, is solely concerned with the "fight against pollution and resource depletion" whose "central objective" is "the health and affluence of people in the developed countries" (Naess, 3). The deep approach tries to get at the roots of our ecological problems through a transformation of our lifestyles and values, not simply looking for new technologies to clean up waste. Deep ecology tries to get away from an anthropocentric way of looking at the world.

As a holistic, philosophical approach, I believe deep ecology and the *Tao Te Ching* are highly compatible. Deep ecology maintains an ecological approach which includes a spiritual dimension, permeating all facets of life. Further, deep ecology does not advocate using only temporary clean-up procedures, little short-term ecological fix-up jobs, while supporting a continuously growing economy. Deep ecology, like early Taoist thought, suggests a turning back, a regeneration of ideas and approaches to reestablish harmony with the processes of the earth – to be tune with the flow of the *tao*. In what follows in this paper, I will compare seven key points of deep ecology with chapters in the *Tao Te Ching* in order to show the similarities between the two philosophies. The *Tao Te Ching* has much to offer, practically and spiritually, to the deep ecologically-minded person.

### Seven Points of Relationship

1) “Rejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image” (Naess, 3)

Everything is intrinsically related to every other thing. Due to the interrelation of all things we cannot keep a human-centered vision of the world. By thinking anthropocentrically we elevate the importance of humankind above all other organisms. This way of thinking allows us to sustain the notion that we are in control of nature and denies the inherent worth of all beings. Since all organisms have value in themselves “nothing can be regarded solely instrumentally: everything deserves respect” (Zimmerman, 25). In accordance with the vast systems of interrelation on earth is the principle of homeostasis – that is, an alteration in one part of the system generates compensation in another part. Homeostasis implies the idea of balance. Everything is involved in an intricate balance that is continually being affected by changes in any part of the system.

Balance and harmony are important concerns in the *Tao Te Ching*. First it is important to realize that humans “may live in discord with nature rather than in harmony with it” and to distinguish between the “constant *tao* (‘the unconditioned ... the all-pervading, the ineffable’) and the natural *tao* (‘the underlying principles of natural change’)” (Callicott, 68). Natural *tao* is the “way of the universe, the orderly and harmonious unfolding of its phenomena” (Callicott, 72). I like to think of it as the energy which runs through all things, connecting us together, as well as sustaining life and spirit. As the origin of all things, *tao* is the foundation for the vast interlocking systems of mutual dependence in the world; *tao* is order and the way of expressing that order. Roger Ames suggests it is helpful to use “focus-field” language as a way of understanding the relatedness expressed in Taoist thought. In this language *tao* is the field and *te* is the focus, where the individual *tes* are the parts which make up the whole *tao*. *Te* is virtue or “the powers of something or someone emanating from their innate character” (LaFargue, 246). Therefore, like deep ecology, the *Tao Te Ching* asserts that the innate powers of each individual are essential to the composite *tao*.

2) "Biospherical egalitarianism—in principle" (Naess, 4)

Biospherical egalitarianism assumes the equal right for all things to live and blossom; this is not a privilege restricted to humans (Naess, 4). The "in principle" clause is inserted because realistically (however unfortunate) killing, exploitation, and suppression will happen in human relationships with other humans as well as with animals (Naess, 4). Yet, it is important to realize the intrinsic value of every part of, as well as the whole, biosphere. For our human happiness and well-being is dependent on the success of the other constituents of the world. It is imperative to get out of the master-slave role we assume in relation to both other organisms and other human beings.

First, the "in principle" part relates to the *Tao Te Ching's* sayings about going into war, at least in tone. As chapter 31 says: "Weapons are ill-omened tools,/Not proper instruments./When their use can't be avoided,/Calm restraint is best." This is an acknowledgment of the total unavoidable reality of war, an admission that suppression and exploitation do happen. Also, it proposes a stance to take upon encountering such a situation – not to delight in war or killing but to feel grief and sorrow at the inevitability of such a situation. In chapter 42 the notion of the importance of the individual parts of the world is stressed. The "ten thousand things carry shade/And embrace sunlight./Shade and sunlight, *yin* and *yang*/Breath blending into harmony." Without shade and sunlight and without *yin* and *yang*, the "ten thousand things" (people or organisms) will not be in harmony. The *yin/yang* parts are dependent on each other to make up the whole. The *yin/yang* parts are like *te*, as they contribute to the whole *tao*. The *yin/yang* idea also suggests a balance of the qualities in each *te* and the necessity for all *tes* to function freely to create an overall *yin/yang* balance in the world.

Getting out of the master-slave role is also stressed by the *Tao Te Ching's* advice on ruling. In chapter 57, "The more prohibitions and rules,/The poorer people become./The sharper people's weapons/The more they riot./The more skilled the techniques/The more grotesque their works./The more elaborate the laws/The more they commit crimes." This chapter describes what happens when a government or ruler puts itself in a dominating, or "master," role over the people. Nothing good comes from this type of relationship. Instead, the *Tao Te Ching* suggests that the ruler should "do nothing," as in nothing to disrupt the flow of the universe, and the people will "transform themselves" and "govern themselves." Living in prosperity and simplicity, the people will be happy and without dominating external control.

3) "Principles of diversity and of symbiosis" (Naess, 4)

Diversity enhances the potential of survival for life on earth by providing opportunities for new modes of life and a richness of forms (Naess, 4). The "survival of the fittest" motif should not be interpreted as a mode for domination and exploitation, but the ability to co-exist and cooperate in complex relationships (Naess, 4). Further, humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity present on the planet.

Ecologically inspired attitudes therefore favor diversity of human ways of life, of cultures, of occupations, of economies. They support the fight against economic and cultural, as much as military invasion and domination, and they are opposed to the annihilation of seals and whales as much as to that of human tribes or cultures (Naess, 4-5).

Symbiosis is the "living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two or more dissimilar organisms (Webster, 1195).

Again, this point recognizes the interrelation of all things and our mutual dependence on one another for a rich, diversified life. In chapter 61 of the *Tao Te Ching*, mutualism is venerated as the best way for different groups of people to benefit: "A great nation flows down/To be the world's pool,/The female under heaven/...A great nation/Lowers itself/ and wins over a small one./A small nation/Keeps itself low/And wins over a great one/...Sometimes becoming low wins/Sometimes staying low wins." Both support and perpetuate the well-being of the other.

4) "Anti-class posture" (Naess, 5)

In our relationships we must perceive that the "exploiter lives differently from the exploited, but both are adversely affected in their potentialities for self-realization" (Naess, 5). In this case as well, there is a recognition that oppression does exist, but we should be aware of this and know that what we do affects us just as much as it affects them. Both egalitarianism and symbiosis support an anti-class posture and should be remembered when dealing with issues regarding international relations, especially with developing countries. This, again, relates to the vital need to be aware of interrelationships, not acting as master, and taking the low place in relationships.

The *Tao Te Ching* has an anti-class posture which emphasizes not being concerned with appearances: "Exotic goods ensnarl human lives./Therefore the Sage/Takes care of the belly, not the eye./Chooses one, rejects the other" (Ch.12). Though not directly related, being overly worried about the way one looks or wanting to be judged by precious possessions makes others anxious about them. They yearn for items that will give them higher social standing, but are unnecessary for happiness and often wasteful.

Points three and four also support the principles of bioregionalism. Diversity of human life and culture as well as the inherent worth of all things is much favored by deep ecologists. The principles of bioregionalism support living close to the land and knowing the earth. The premise for this (see the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 80) is that a culture is most healthy when its practices, myths, and norms are tied to its local geographical region (Zimmerman, 27). This reflects a need for our life practices to encompass everything from geographical location to respect for all forms of life, to recycling, and to strong interpersonal relationships without the master-slave role involved. The *Tao Te Ching* suggests that we follow nature, nature on its own, not touched by people (Callicott, 67). Taoist thought esteems naturalness, pristine innocence, simplicity, and spontaneity to achieve harmony with nature (Tucker, 154).

5) "Fight against pollution and resource depletion" (Naess, 5)

This point is the one which shallow ecologists most concern themselves with. In contrast, deep ecologists insist on seeing this issue in consideration with all the other seven points. Deep ecologists also see this as a reminder that our present human interference is excessive; we need to immediately reduce our destructive ways. This emphasizes looking at everything as a whole, which is in line with Taoist ideals. The *Tao Te Ching* refers to turning back: "Reversal is *tao's* movement./Yielding is *tao's* practice./All things originate from being./Being originates from non-being" (Ch. 40). "This is usually interpreted as meaning that the *tao* causes all things to undergo a cyclic change" (Callicott, 69). Hence, this can relate to recycling as well as to the cyclical nature of the regenerative powers of the earth. "Environmentalists promote 'recycling' as much for symbolic as for practical reasons – as a gesture, quite in keeping with the spirit of Taoism to tune the human microcosm to the ecosystemic macrocosm" (Callicott, 69). "Think globally, act locally" is a popular environmental phrase which immediately comes to mind.

*Wu-wei* is an important concept in keeping with ecological thought – using non-egocentric action when relating to one's environs. The use of appropriate technology is central to *wu-wei*.

Nuclear power—essentially boiling water to generate electricity, using an exotic and risky technology is, and expending huge amounts of capital and labor—is *yu-wei*. Wind-generated electricity, solar space-heating, commuting by bicycle, and the like are *wu-wei* (Callicott, 74).

The latter examples harness nature's powers to supply energy to human beings without harming the earth and can do so at a more cost-effective way in the long run (once the technologies become more readily available). This is in tune with the weak and yielding attitudes the *Tao Te Ching* suggests that we cultivate. Manipulating nature on the other hand, forcing it, is counterproductive (Tucker, 154). "Trying to control the world?/I see you won't succeed./The world is a spiritual vessel/And cannot be controlled./Those who control, fail./Those who grasp, lose" (Ch. 29).

6) "Complexity, not complication" (Naess, 5)

"Organisms, ways of life, and interactions in biosphere in general exhibit complexity of an astoundingly high level" (Naess, 6). This gives rise to thinking of biospherical interactions as vast systems of continuous interplay. On a human scale, "it favors integrated actions in which the whole person is active, not mere reactions" (Naess, 6). Naess believes we need a change in policy for human interactions with an integrated variety of activities, combining different types of work to make the individual more aware of life outside her own sphere. When the environment and all things in our small biosphere are looked at as a vast system the individual *tes* are dynamic and in harmony with each other. These *tes* can assert themselves in relation to and in response to all other *tes*. This needs to be realized in human life,

as we are collectively a manifestation of the *tao* in the biosphere and we are each a *te*.

7) "Local autonomy and decentralization" (Naess, 6)

This last point promotes local self-government and subsequent material and mental self-sufficiency (Naess, 6). Decentralization is made up of four major elements. The first is that the legislation, police forces, and other such external controls can never be so subtle or effective as internal controls. In this sense, it is necessary to aid social conditions that allow public opinion and participation in decision-making communities. The larger the community, the harder it is for individuals to have a voice and feel as though they have control over decision-making. Second, in less populated areas agricultural diversification through smaller farms, allows for the development of subsistence agriculture. There is greater feedback between supply and demand which avoids waste and over-production. This also eliminates the production of goods which people do not want. Third, a small community allows greater pleasure for the individual and higher freedom of action. Lastly, village life has less impact on the environment through the self-sufficient lifestyle cultivated by the first three elements. It is important to recognize a difference between bigness and greatness. Decentralization is called for in chapter 80 of the *Tao Te Ching*: "Small country, few people—/Hundreds of devices/But none are used./People ponder on death/And don't travel far . . . Sweet their food,/Beautiful their clothes,/Peaceful their homes,/Delightful their customs." This presents an image of a community of people so content with their small, intimate community that they find no need to search for happiness elsewhere. They enjoy life and appreciate beauty in simplicity.

### **Ecosophy, Self-Realization, and Non-Dualism**

Further in line with the *Tao Te Ching* are Naess' theories of ecosophy, self-realization, and non-dualism. These three components fit with the above seven points, giving a broader, unified perspective on a holistic ecological worldview. Ecosophy is the philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium (Naess, 8). The seven points combine as priorities of ecophilosophical thinking. Naess coined the phrase "ecosophy" for he feels "ecology is a *limited* science which makes *use* of scientific methods" (Naess, 8). Whereas philosophy allows debate and depends on a different sort of wisdom than ecology does, a wisdom which considers social, political, and ethical reasoning as well as science. This agrees nicely with the *Tao Te Ching* and its all-inclusive philosophy, touching on all of the aspects of life which ecosophy aims to include. Looking to chapter 42 again, "The ten thousand things carry shade/And embrace sunlight./Shade and sunlight, *yin* and *yang*,/Breath blending into harmony." All of the ten thousand things exist and thrive because of the diversity of the things and come together in harmonious breath, or *ch'i*, creating a cosmic harmony through the balance of the constituent parts.

"The primary norm of Naess' ecosophy is self-realization. A major hypothesis is that all beings are manifestations of the great Self" (Zimmerman, 21). If all things come from the same "great Self" then all things are interrelated. This is why we



cannot restrict the possibilities for self-realization to humans alone, we must include all organisms. Chapter 42 also applies to self-realization, this is the *Tao Te Ching*'s only real reference to a creation: "*Tao* engenders One,/One engenders Two/Two engenders Three,/Three engenders the ten thousand things." Therefore *tao* can be equated with the "great Self" that all things come from. Hence, all of the ten thousand things come from the same source and are interrelated. This interrelation makes it essential that we recognize a wider identification with all things: "wider identification is linked to non-dualism, the insight that there is no ultimate divide between things" (Zimmerman, 21). The *Tao Te Ching* is also a non-dualistic philosophy. In Taoist thought no separation of spirit and body, nature and people, *etc.*, exists. Instead, the *Tao Te Ching* contains a conception of mutually interrelated opposites (Callicott, 72). This is exemplified by the concept of *yin* and *yang*; they are two sides of the same thing with no distinct boundaries. One is inconceivable without the other, just as night is unrealized without day and male cannot exist without female.

Both the wider philosophies and the seven points of deep ecology can be related to the *Tao Te Ching*. This is not to say that the *Tao Te Ching* is an ecological text in the modern sense. Indeed, there were certainly no comparable environmental problems or catastrophes during the time the text was written. Nevertheless, I believe the *Tao Te Ching* does suggest a way to live in harmony with one's surroundings, which includes all organisms and the environment in which one lives. Accordingly, it is necessary to think of the interconnectedness of all things and live in a spirit of *wu-wei* or non-egocentric action.

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